



# Those Who Study and Teach the Qur'an

## Citation

Graham, William A. 2010. Those who study and teach the Qur'an. In *Islamic and Comparative Religious Studies: Selected Writings*, 9-28. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate. Previously published in [Proceedings of the] International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an, ed. Anthony H. Johns. 1981. Australian National University, Canberra, 8-13 May 1980. Canberra City: South Asia Centre, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University.

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## Chapter Nine

**“Those Who Study and Teach the Qur’ān”<sup>1</sup>**

My title this morning is taken from a prophetic *Hadīth* that is widely quoted in Muslim sources, from the great compendia of Bukhārī, Muslim, and others to later works on the Qur’ān such as the fifth-century (425 A.H.) *Kitāb al-Mabānī*. The report is usually cited on the authority of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, who, whatever his political vicissitudes, was known for his love of the Qur’ān. According to this report, the Prophet once said to his Companions: *inna afdalakum man ta‘allama l-Qur’ān wa-‘allamahu*,<sup>2</sup> which may be rendered something like this: “the best among you are those who study and teach the Qur’ān.” While none of us would want to be so prideful as to claim special personal merit because of our work with the Qur’ān, I would like to think that our scholarly aspirations are such as to allow these words to serve as a kind of symbolic Prophetic blessing upon the present conference. Certainly each of us has come here because of his or her interest in, and indeed, passion for, studying and teaching about the Qur’ān.

Nevertheless, I am simultaneously aware that the invocation of this particular saying of the Prophet of Islam as a symbolic statement about who we are and what we are engaged in here is fraught with potential for disagreement and objection—not, I would like to think, to any major degree in the present assemblage, although that is possible, but definitely in other circles. Certainly in the light of history it is audacious and indeed presumptuous to apply these words of the Prophet not only to those devout Muslims here

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<sup>1</sup> This was delivered as the first plenary session address at an international conference on the Qur’ān, held in Canberra from 8-13 May 1980 at the Australian National University and chaired by A. H. Johns, celebrating the fourteenth centenary of the Muslim era. It was published subsequently in a conference volume: *International Congress for the Study of the Qur’an, Australian National University, Canberra, 8-13 May 1980*, ser. 1, ed. A.H. Johns (Canberra [1981?]). I have retained the lecture and notes almost entirely in their original form, as this was a very specifically directed piece, written for this occasion. While I have not fundamentally changed my thinking since, I would probably couch my arguments somewhat differently today, but I think the address still worth reprinting. At its publication, I dedicated the lecture to Rudi Paret (1901- 1983), to signal my gratitude both for his concordance and translation of the Qur’ ān and for his encouragement of my own study of Hadith and Qur’ān after I came to know him while doing dissertation research in Tübingen with Josef van Ess for several months in 1972. Paret was often taken to be an orientalist with little interest in Muslim approaches to the Qur’ān; I did not find him to be at all so in my contact or later correspondence with him and was glad to signal this by dedicating the published address to him. See also my obituary for him in the *Muslim World* 73 (1983): 133-141.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Sahīh* (9 vols., Cairo 1378.1958?) 66.21. Numerous further occurrences are cited in A.J. Wensinck, *et al.*, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (7 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1936-69), s.v. “ta‘allama”.

for whom they will have served from childhood as a moral and religious injunction to occupy themselves with God's word, but also to those of us of differing faith who have in their scholarly quest for knowledge and understanding made the Qur'ān a principal focus of their study and teaching. In centuries past, only a bare handful, if indeed any at all, of those non-Muslims who have studied the Qur'ān would themselves have found their inclusion with Muslims as "those who study and teach the Qur'ān" either desirable or even conceivable. On the other side, an equally small (or non-existent) number of Muslims would have acquiesced in allowing non-Muslims (and "orientalists" least of all) to be dignified or even acknowledged as students, let alone teachers, of things qur'ānic. Certainly neither group would have been able to envision the present conference at all.

Today there will still be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Marxist, or other non-Muslim Islamic scholars who prefer to see their work on the Qur'ān or other subjects as all but completely divorced from whatever Muslim scholars have done or are now doing with the Qur'ān and related studies. There will be still more Muslim scholars who feel strongly that non-Muslims have no right even to engage in study of the Qur'ān, whatever their interests or their sensibilities. Yet those of us who are participating in the present conference apparently are of different opinions from either of these groups, as are increasing numbers of both Muslim and non-Muslim colleagues. For the next five days, we as both Muslim and non-Muslim students of qur'ānic subjects are gathered together under Muslim and non-Muslim auspices to share in study and consideration of the Qur'ān and its fourteen-hundred-year history. This was clearly and aptly stated in the list of major goals set forth in the original announcement of the conference. This common enterprise surely demands that none of us who have agreed to participate rejects out of hand the view that all of us here are, with respect to the study of the Qur'ān and its history, participants in a common forum and equally, if differently, "those who study and teach the Qur'ān".

I have chosen this question of Muslim and non-Muslim participation in shared study of the Qur'ān to develop with you this morning, at the beginning of our work together, because it poses a fundamental issue that a conference such as ours can ignore only at great risk: risk to the overall integrity of its purpose as a collaborative undertaking and, at a more mundane level, risk of specific misunderstandings and diversions of energies during the next few days. This fundamental issue is, of course, *how* both Muslim and non-Muslim students and teachers of Islamic history and religion can participate productively in common colloquy about matters touching the Qur'ān. (I say *how* they can participate, not *whether* they can do so, because presumably we have got beyond the latter question by virtue of our individual decisions to be a part of this conference.)

Let there be no misunderstanding: I raise this matter for consideration as we begin *not* because the primary purpose of this conference is to develop some kind of Muslim/non-Muslim "dialogue". This is not our goal here, and I at least am grateful that it is not. It is my experience that express attempts at inter-confessional "dialogue" usually turn out to be two sets of monologues emphasizing precisely those matters that divide two groups; our purpose as a diverse, yet single group is rather a *colloquy*, which sets us all to work collaboratively on problems that we share as scholars, and which thus eschews the limiting and often counterproductive "face-off" of the artificial "religious dialogue"

situation. The significance of the present conference lies in shared concern with the admirably stated purposes set out for us: to advance qur'ānic studies (and with them, Islamic studies, here and around the world), to do so in a context that involves Muslims and non-Muslims, and to do so in such a way as to contribute to a wider understanding, especially outside the Muslim world, of the Qur'ān's role in Islam.

A venture with purposes such as these is a relatively new thing in the fourteen-hundred-year history of Islamic scholarship and is, to my knowledge, unprecedented in the field of qur'ānic studies *per se*. Its realization in our gathering together here is a testimony to what I see as a new, or at least recently emerging, phase in the history of qur'ānic studies—or indeed, in the field of Islamic studies. If I am correct in this, this phase will be marked by the coming-of-age of a tradition of scholarship that is collaborative and constructive beyond the limits of what has prevailed up to now. My own designation for this new tradition is “humane scholarship”, and I shall return at a later point in my remarks to describe with some specificity what I discern and am describing under this rubric.

First, however, let me review with you what I see to be the scholarly traditions of qur'ānic studies that have dominated the scene until recently (and we shall return to more current Qur'ān study). The first, and by far the older, of these is the tradition of Qur'ān study by Muslim scholars. The second and younger is the non-Muslim, largely Western, academic tradition of qur'ānic studies. What are most noteworthy about these two very different traditions of learning are their relative exclusivity and mutual isolation—characteristics that have only in recent times begun to weaken at all, and then only in certain quarters, not universally in either tradition. Let us look, then, at each of these two older modes of Qur'ān study.

The exclusively Muslim scholarly tradition may be said to have begun effectively with Muhammad and the Companions. Ever after, generation after generation of Muslims devoted their lives to what in time became and still continue as *al-'ulūm al-shar'iyya*, those branches of learning that buttress and augment moral and religious knowledge and life. Successive generations of scholars have contributed to a tradition of learning that is marked by a dedication, erudition, and extensiveness second to none in the worldwide history of religion. Without these labours of pious scholarship, no small part of which was the very preservation of the traditions and chronicles of the early Muslim community, the subsequent appearance of either the specifically non-Muslim tradition of Qur'ān study or what I am referring to as a new “humane” Qur'ān scholarship would be inconceivable.

The heart of all Muslim scholarship has always been the Qur'ān and the sciences related to it. In the “Recitation” (“Qur'ān”) Muslims have heard God speaking to them: its words are the temporal sounds of the eternal divine Speech, which is the ultimate source for knowledge of God's Will and God's Truth. It is this knowledge that Muslim scholars have sought to elaborate and to clarify through the *shar'ī* sciences in order to be, both as individuals and as a community, most fully and perfectly *muslim*, “submissive” to God. The reasoning of the scholarly enterprise has served as complement to the Revelation and to the Prophetic example (*sunna*) in the formulation of norms for Muslim life. Where Truth is conceived as single and unified, reason and revelation must ever be congruent and continuous, never opposed or separate. Both, however, are essential; one

without the other is inconceivable. This is the essence of the confessional character of Muslim scholarship in general and Qur'ān study in particular: the whole edifice of rational inquiry and reasoned argumentation (and it is an immense and complex one) is built here squarely upon the bedrock of divinely revealed Truth. Whatever else may be subject to question, the revealed text stands firm as the one standard of Truth, transcending even reason, and present as the yardstick of all human endeavor, scholarly or otherwise.

Traditional Qur'ān study among Muslims has thus been premised upon recognition of the Qur'ān as the verbatim revelation of God's Will for human affairs. Accordingly, the prime arbiters of the kinds of expertise and types of study that developed have been the practical needs of the community, or *Ummah*—in settling matters of legal dispute, ritual observance, moral standards, social convention, theological interpretation, linguistic ambiguity, political policy, or personal piety. As a scholarship that grew out of, and that has played a central role in, a community with a unified worldview, Muslim Qur'ānic studies have always been in some sense “applied” studies—scholarship that has had immediate relevance for concrete realities of life in a way that no “outsider”, non-Muslim scholarship could.

However, if such immediate religious aims have been primary to Muslim study of the Qur'ān, a significant motivating role for such study must also be given to more purely “scholastic” interests among Muslim scholars. Beside the “applied” or “practical” utility of the many Qur'ānic disciplines, there have always been the simple fascination for, insatiable pleasure in, and unending curiosity about, the divine Word and everything connected with it. If such motivations for Qur'ān study seem “theoretical” or “academic”, it is because we make too facile and sharp a distinction between the “practical” and the “theoretical”, when ultimately they are conjoined. No phrase that I know of expresses this unity of the specifically “religious practicality” and the specifically “academic scholasticism” of Muslim Qur'ān study more clearly than the evocative title of Jean Leclerc's masterful study of Christian monasticism, *L'Amour des lettres et le desir de Dieu*, “the love of learning and desire for God.” The two poles of religious scholarship—at least in monotheistic traditions—must always be these. Such has certainly been the case with Muslim learning as a whole, including study of the Qur'ān.

Thus the fascination of these scholars with the Prophet's life and times and with minute details of the Qur'ānic text or the revelatory process have clearly not derived from solely “practical” religious interests more than from innate curiosity, personal enthusiasm, or antiquarian zeal for these matters. How else do we understand the loving attention given to proper and precise recitation (*tajwīd*) or to delineation of the “modes of revelation” (*kayfīyāt al-wahy*)? The elaborate arts of recitation could not have developed as they did purely out of the pragmatic need for exactly regular recitation patterns aimed at guaranteeing perfect comprehension. Nor can the later theologians' use of the “modes of revelation” (how the particular revelations came to the Prophet, whether by vision, audition, inspiration, etc.) in the debates on the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān have been the primary motivation for the collection and preservation of such reports.

If we turn from motivations to the actual foci or key concerns of Qur'ānic studies among Muslims, two principal kinds of interest emerge as particularly worthy of our

notice. On the one hand are the efforts to collect, “fix”, and thus preserve as a recognized, authoritative unity the many separate revelations; on the other is the development of modes of interpretation for the scriptural *dicta* and of means of applying them across the whole spectrum of communal and personal needs.

The collection, fixation, and preservation of the divine Word began apparently (to judge from the earliest sources) even before Muhammad’s death with memorization by reciters and written transcription by scribes of the individual units of revelation transmitted by the Prophet. Since this Word was first and foremost an oral reality, the primary mode of transmission and preservation was committing it to heart (*hifẓ*) and constantly reciting it (*qirā’a*, *tilāwa*). Hand in hand with this went the writing down (*kitāba*) of the revelations. Both oral transmission and written transmission were thus the twin bases upon which the qur’ānic sciences were built. Both were essential to the very process of collection and arrangement into a single *mushaf* of the separate recitations (*jam’ al-qur’ān wa-tartībuhu*), a process that may well have started under the Prophet himself and one that is generally accepted as having been completed under the caliph ‘Uthmān.

Muslim scholarly interest in the text of the Qur’ān, its accuracy, its form or arrangement, and its proper recitation, did not cease by any means with the ‘Uthmānic recension. On the contrary, it flourished in each succeeding generation with undiminished intensity and passion. Such interest called forth ongoing study of variants in the recitation and writing of particular passages (*‘ilm al-qirā’āt*) and the related arts of proper recitation (*tajwīd*) according to the several modes (*ahruf*) passed on by the best early reciters. Constant involvement with the intricacies of the qur’ānic text has also been an ongoing and fundamental part of Arabic grammatical science (*‘ilm al-nahw*). Further, as recently as the first quarter of this century, a milestone in the history of Muslim textual scholarship was marked with the preparation of the great “Cairo text” of the Qur’ān. So we are reminded that such studies continue to the present age and have not been limited to early Islam.

Dependent upon, but ultimately more important than the studies connected with the *form* of the revealed text and its preservation was the work of *understanding*: discerning the meaning of God’s Word and applying it to human affairs. Ultimately all sectors of life in Islam, the legal and political as well as the ritual and liturgical, were dependent upon this activity of interpretation or exegesis (*tafsīr*). Interpretation began with the bearer of the Revelation himself. The subsequent development in the *Umma* of the concepts “Way of the Prophet” and “Emulation of the Prophet” (*sunnat al-nabī*, *iqtidā’ al-nabī*) was predicated upon the assumption that the life of God’s Apostle is itself the best *tafsīr*, the best guide to and working-out of the particular meanings of the Qur’ānic recitations. Once bereft of their living example, the Muslims turned to the *Hadīth* reports that enshrined this example as their chief medium of interpretational authority for reading the divine Word. Hence one could even argue that the *Hadīth* sciences, like those of *kalām* and *fiqh*, exist ultimately only as specialized extensions of the general *tafsīr* of the Qur’ān.

The nexus of *tafsīr* with these other major sectors of Muslim religious scholarship has been particularly evident in Muslim concern with the “occasions of revelations (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), that is, the particulars about when, where, why, and pertaining to whom each

separate *āya* or group of *āyāt* was sent down. Aside from their historical interest from the standpoint of Prophetic biography (*sīra*), these reports are crucial to the question of abrogating and abrogated verses (*al-nāsikh wa'l-mansūkh*), which figure of course in matters of doctrinal and legal norms. They are also important for all types of interpretation because they deal with the original context of revelation and thus show how the original revelation may have been applied. Lexicographical and grammatical interests are also prominent adjuncts of the *tafsīr*, as for example in the *gharīb al-qur'ān* literature, and these concerns stem both from philological passion and from basic need for interpretation of divine Word for everyday use. In these and other ways, *tafsīr* in the largest sense has contact with most of the religious sciences and remains finally the queen of these sciences. In interpretation, both academic and religious concerns and formal and substantive interests find their places.

The situation is predictably quite different when we turn from Muslim to non-Muslim study of the Qur'ān. The latter scholarly tradition has its roots in the medieval Christian West but has matured as a coherent tradition only since the European Enlightenment. Prior to the end of the 18th century, study of the Qur'ān outside of Islam was in the main limited to the primarily polemical involvement of occasional Christian scholars. Such religious motivation is evident in even the work of leading early scholars such as Robert of Ketton in the 12th, Ludovici Marracci in the 17th, and George Sale in the 18th century, all of whom studied and translated the Qur'ān.

Since the Enlightenment, non-Muslim Qur'ān study has come into its own as a part of more general Islamic studies within the modern university and its academic tradition. This tradition is in *theory* explicitly set apart from confessional presuppositions of any one religious tradition, its sole arbiter being human reason and its primary object knowledge that is (a) verifiable—at least within the limits of human reason—and (b) also accessible to anyone of any creed or ideology who agrees to submit to the strictures of reasoned and public inquiry and discussion. *Ideally*, this should mean freedom from all dogmatism, religious or otherwise. In *practice*, however it has proved to be most difficult to escape either religious or ideological bias on the one hand or, on the other, the naturalistic or even materialist delusion that by limiting discussion to purely external data of the sense world, one has dealt adequately with reality. This latter point is one to which we shall have occasion to return later.

However, whatever the limitations of the non-Muslim academic tradition of Qur'ān scholarship, it has, by any standards, been a spectacularly productive and immensely significant tradition of learning. Without its contributions to place alongside those of Muslim scholarship, our shared scholarly understanding of the Qur'ān in particular and of Islam in general would be decidedly poorer. Its major positive aim has been to make fullest possible use of the Qur'ān as a documentary source for linguistic and historical knowledge, especially knowledge of Islamic origins and early development. It has pursued this goal with a tenacity, thoroughness, and singleness of purpose that even its critics must acknowledge. Weil, Muir, Nöldeke, Buhl, Schwally, Horowitz, Blachère, Bell, Jeffery, Paret—even a few of the names that mark this academic tradition serve to remind us of the truly remarkable accomplishments of a single 150-year period of study.

The particular emphases of non-Muslim scholars in their treatment of the Qur'ān might be classified according to a variety of schemes, each using different rubrics. For

our purpose, I want to call attention to three different emphases or kinds of study that seem to me central to, and most characteristic of, this tradition. All three begin with the fact of the Qur'ān as a human document that can be located in a particular place, time, and cultural tradition. All three involve utilization of the Qur'ān as a documentary source for further knowledge of a variety of matters, including the development of the Arabic language, the historical background of the rise of Islam, and the personality traits of Muhammad.

Perhaps the oldest of these three non-Muslim scholarly concerns is the problem of understanding and translating as accurately as possible the text of the Qur'ān itself. This focus upon “textual” matters in the largest sense is basic to all academic study of the Qur'ān and should not, even within non-Muslim scholarship, be conceived of as a separate field or methodology in itself. Philology, historical linguistics, lexicography, textual criticism, and literary analysis of form and content all have their places among the methodologies that have been applied in this tradition of Qur'ān study and that together make up the principal elements of what I am loosely characterizing as a primarily textual orientation. This orientation or emphasis has not, interestingly enough, brought forth major attempts at textual criticism of the ‘Uthmanic codex (J. Wansbrough’s work being a recent and notable, if isolated exception). Instead, focus has been upon close examination of the vocabulary, style, structure, and thematic of the whole. Most non-Muslim Qur'ān study, whether that in the style of a Nöldeke, Jeffery, Bravmann, or Izutsu. This study has been characterized by strong elements of this kind of textual emphasis, and of course all serious translators of the Qur'ān into foreign languages have had to grapple extensively with philological and textual concerns as a matter of course.

Following closely upon, and closely related to, this concern with the text and language of the Qur'ān has been a particular kind of historical interest that stands out as perhaps the major emphasis of non-Muslim Qur'ān study. This is the inquiry into the “background” or “origin” of the Qur'ān: the study of major ideas and specific details of the Qur'ān in *their relation* to—or, as non-Muslim scholarship has tended to see it, *their derivation from*—older cultural and religious sources, pre-eminently those of the Jewish and Christian traditions. In the massive literature produced with this kind of problem in view, one can discern perhaps most easily of anywhere some of the often quite unconscious cultural and religious biases of non-Muslim Qur'ānic studies as a whole. Specifically, the implication in such work is often that if historical derivation can be shown, the “dependence” of the later tradition(s) of Islam on Christian or Jewish predecessors is thereby proven, thus undermining the distinctive and creative character of the later tradition or even its transcendent dimension (i.e., by showing its temporal “origin”).

On the other hand, the positive side of this latter non-Muslim emphasis on “origins” in study of the Qur'ān must, of course, be stressed. This kind of interest and the scholarship it has produced has been basic to our understanding of (1) the semantic background of the Qur'ānic text, (2) the particular nexus of previously existing vocabulary and ideas that provided a medium for the Qur'ānic revelation, and (3) the strong continuity—something firmly asserted in the Qur'ān itself—of the Islamic tradition with its monotheistic predecessors, especially the Jewish and Christian traditions. Ultimately, the study of the Qur'ān with a view to elucidating the historical background that fostered and nourished it



is evidence of the abiding broader interest of modern academic scholarship in the origins of things—a fascination with tracing antecedents that seeks, completely aside from possible cultural or religious or polemical interests, to show the continuities of human history over time.

This type of historical emphasis has had to share center-stage in non-Muslim scholarship with another kind of historical concern with the Qur'ān, namely that which leads to efforts to reconstruct the life and times of Muhammad and his contemporaries. Here the emphasis has not been upon whence the Qur'ānic worldview derives, but rather what the Qur'ānic text can tell us about the man who presented it to the world, the community that grew up in response to its message, and the history of the earliest period of this community's life. A central part of this kind of study has been the often-repeated attempt to “date”, or at least chronologically to “order”, the separate units of Qur'ānic material. Such chronologizing efforts have not stemmed, as in the Muslim concern with *asbāb al-nuzūl* and Meccan-Medinan distinctions generally, from primarily practical purposes of applying later revelations in preference to earlier ones, but rather in order that the Qur'ānic text can be used for historical reconstruction of the time over which it was revealed (as Blachère puts it: “l'évolution de la predication du Prophète”). Here the central fascination of non-Muslim scholarship with Muhammad's life and the rise of Islam is seen to be bound up inextricably with its study of the Qur'ān in its original setting, which has been described by one non-Muslim historian as “the one sure document for Muhammad's time that we possess.” Here historical curiosity and antiquarian fascination with uncovering “what really happened”, however chimerical such a venture may be, are most evident and underscore the academic or scholastic motives that have predominated in non-Muslim Qur'ānic studies.

We have now before us, if only in broad outline, a summary picture of the salient characteristics of the two major and distinctive traditions of Qur'ān study during the past fourteen centuries. We have seen differences in their purposes and in their foci of interest. Let us now attempt to assess the two more generally and comparatively.

Most generally, the division between them has been due in large measure to differing frames of reference or presuppositions that are evident from our preceding discussion. Both strands of scholarship have dealt with a particular religious tradition, that of Islam, but from wholly different contextual positions: the one from location within, even centrally within, Islamic tradition itself, and the other from outside, and completely outside, Islamic tradition. As we have already seen, significant divergences have resulted. Muslim Qur'ān study has worked from the *a priori* understanding of reality as inclusive not only of what modern academia calls “natural” phenomena, but also of numinal or supra-natural phenomena; in other words, transcendence is a “given” and must be reckoned with in rational inquiry. The testimony to this for Muslims is of course the Qur'ān. Meanwhile, non-Muslim Qur'ān study has tended towards acceptance of, or acquiescence in, an Enlightenment naturalism or materialism with respect to what it recognizes as “real.” It has, in the main, isolated the intellectual and rational from the poetic and the religious and worked on the assumption that the former deal with what is “really real”, by which is meant the phenomenal world of sense data. This excludes *a priori* the possibility of a numinous or transcendent dimension as a “given” in the “real” world.

With specific reference to the Qur'ān, these two traditions have by and large held correspondingly opposed positions. The Muslim has presupposed the divine character and origin of the Qur'ān, the non-Muslim its human, temporal character and origin. Despite a keen interest in the history of the events surrounding the sending down of the Qur'ān, Muslims have been, as a result of their religious commitment to preserving the ontological “otherness” of the Qur'ān as God’s speech, loath to delve deeply into any temporal causality that might be present in the background and circumstances of the Revelation. Instead, they have tended to set arbitrary limits to investigation of the myriad historical strands that, from a naturalistic perspective, coalesced in the prophetic-revelatory event that brought forth Islamic tradition and faith. A corollary of this has been the theological view that Muhammad as God’s Apostle was protected from all error in his transmission of the Divine Word and in no way involved in the actual formulation of that Word, and that the Qur'ān is God’s Word in *lafz*, literal expression, as well as in *ma'nā*, meaning.

Conversely, non-Muslim scholars, starting with the premise that the Qur'ān is not from God, but a product of Muhammad’s mind, have been often over-zealous in seeking the complex material and ideological factors that “brought about” or “determined” the events of Muhammad’s lifetime and the composition of the Qur'ān. Muhammad is seen as having sincerely but mistakenly believed that he was receiving divine revelations. What he “produced” in the Qur'ān can be traced to earlier “sources” and thereby be explained away as “mere borrowings”—thus confirming, in this view, the human origins of all that is in the Qur'ān.

Thus we can observe that the ontological concern among Muslim scholars for the divine origin of the Qur'ān and Muhammad’s calling has led on their side to often arbitrary rejection of any attempts to discuss temporal factors that may have been at work in the Qur'ānic genesis. Similarly, the ontological presumption among non-Muslim scholars that the Qur'ān is not divine has often led to reductionist or materialistic historical determinism in treating the coming into being of the Qur'ān. Muslims have been swept up in the cosmic drama of revelation and tended to minimize the human role in this drama; non-Muslims have been fascinated by the human drama and all but wholly immune to its possible cosmic proportions.

It is my view that neither of these impressive but ultimately intellectually limited traditions of Qur'ānic scholarship is any longer persuasive in the context of a pluralistic, global scholarship in which Muslim and non-Muslim can work. Both will continue within their circumscribed domains, but inherent tendencies towards authoritarian limitation of open inquiry in the one and, in the other, reductionist oversimplification of the complex and ultimately elusive reality of the human with which we work, will preclude any true meeting of minds across the gulf that separates them. From the vantage point of humane scholarship, both are prisoners of their own worldviews and orthodoxies and essentially incapable of taking with final seriousness the very different values and premises of a cultural or religious worldview other than their own. To borrow from Ogden Nash, these are traditions “both of which are irreconcilable, and neither is by the other beguileable.”

This stark appraisal of the separation of these two traditions is of course extreme in one sense. One of Boris Pasternak’s characters remarks that “it’s only in mediocre books

that people are divided into two camps and have nothing to do with each other. In real life everything gets mixed up,” and Qur’ānic studies have been no exception in that some scholars in both camps have made serious efforts to transcend their own tradition’s limitations. As I have stressed, this conference is testimony to such efforts—or at least their possibility.

On the one hand, devout Muslims have managed to engage in studying and teaching the Qur’ān in the modern secular academy, and their work has been to some degree intelligible in both the traditions we have considered. Such scholars have not presumed that the Qur’ān’s earthly origins and history have to be incompatible with its transcendent, divine essence. They have done their historical-critical work with the Qur’ān in such a way as not to compromise its ultimate quality as revelation.

On the other hand, more and more non-Muslim Qur’ān students have sought first-hand understanding of traditional Muslim Qur’ānic studies and Muslim sensibilities regarding the Qur’ān. They are working in constant colloquy with their Muslim counterparts and are taking the latter’s religious as well as academic opinions with full seriousness. Above all, they are trying to do justice to the Qur’ān as Muslim scripture even while studying it as a documentary source for Islamic historical origins.

It is not that Muslim scholars are becoming “secularized” or capitulating to a reductionist or naturalistic view of reality such as has prevailed in some sectors of modern academia. Nor is it the case that non-Muslim scholars are yielding in the rigor of their historical-critical standards for verification of what the American historian Oscar Handlin calls “the unyielding evidence that survives the past.” It is, rather, that a new kind of openness to *all* the facts and to the *human character* of all the facts is emerging. Such openness is not really at home in either of the older traditions of Qur’ān scholarship. It is rather a new approach—what I have suggested already that we label “humane scholarship”. It is visibly coming into its own—or at least is ready to come in—around us and among us as the hallmark of a third tradition of study—a third that is not simply an amalgam or accommodation of its two precursors.

Thus the response to my original question (“How do Muslim and non-Muslim scholars participate in a shared Qur’ānic scholarship?”) lies already implicitly before us—and among us—in what many persons here today are already doing. I am not proposing some new agenda or enterprise that I have dreamed up for presentation to you. What I want to do in the remainder of my time this morning is to try to make more *explicit* for us all what I see as an emerging humane scholarly endeavor to which those who have come here do or are going to aspire. If to some my comments seem unjustified with regard to what has already begun to happen or naively optimistic with regard to what may happen in the future, they should take my analysis then as a hope for the future that is based upon agreement with Henry David Thoreau’s remark that “in the long run, men hit only what they aim at. Therefore though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.”

As I perceive it, this new scholarly tradition’s “humaneness” lies in its consciousness of having to submit its conclusions as well as its evidence to the reasoned critique of an international scholarly community whose perspective is not bound by a single cultural or religious tradition, but enriched and broadened by awareness of many. This demanding

consciousness is one that presupposes, completely aside from academic open-mindedness, a basic respect for one another's personal sincerity and integrity. Too often previously it was possible for a Muslim scholar to see true religious faith as only a quality of Muslims; and for too long it was possible for a non-Muslim scholar to understand "humanity" as coextensive with "Western humanity". (I am reminded of a recent curriculum brochure of an American university that lists a course in "Oriental Humanities", as though there could be more than one *humanitas*!) Ever more, scholarship generally, and Qur'anic scholarship particularly, has now to seek truth in a worldwide instead of a religiously or ideologically parochial context. Neither Muslim authoritarian traditionalism nor Western-Enlightenment rationalism any longer is sufficient for the tasks of fully humane scholarship. This requires, as most of you here will know as well or better than I, the stretching of all particularistic intellectual horizons and critical sensibilities in recognition that, to quote Thoreau again, "the universe is wider than our views of it."

Correspondingly, a second characteristic that I see in humane study is a certain humility about its own limitations and the relative modesty of its goals. The overt limitations of our data, our reason, our understanding, and our historical perspective serve in this kind of approach as constant reminders of the tenuousness of the enterprise (even if they are also stimuli to creativity and imagination in the enterprise). Such study, whether of the Qur'ān or whatever, does not claim normative force in a theological or ideological sense: it seeks neither to bolster nor to undermine Muslim, Christian, naturalistic, or any other faith. In Qur'ānic studies, this excludes focus upon the ultimate ontological reality of the Qur'ān—as divine or human, uncreated or created. (Of course it does deal with the fact that historically the Qur'ān has been each of these to someone, someplace, sometime.) It does not address the *ultimate* validity of the Qur'ān, whether as divine or as human speech, but it does not avoid addressing the historical circumstances in which it has been seen as one or the other. The business of study is, after all, with the human sphere, and the obvious complexities of this sphere will not let it overestimate its own capacities and legitimate aims.

Third, humane scholarship submits to reason and to the data accessible to reason, but it does not accept reductionism about the nature of reality or its final comprehensibility solely by reason. No humane scholar can fail to deal seriously with the observable fact that Muslims have heard God speak in the Qur'ān. What Muslims have found in the Qur'ān or anything else is recognized in this perspective as being as "hard" a fact as any other with which the truly "objective" scholar must deal. (Certainly it has been a fact with more than its share of historical consequences.) Humane scholarship of the sort that I am describing recognizes that to reduce another person's faith to purely psychic, social, or genetic determinants, let alone to consider it eccentric, is to pass judgment on matters to which the historian at least has no ability to penetrate with any kind of final assurance.

These general comments about the kind of study that seems to me to be evident to increasing degree in Qur'ānic scholarship brings me to two final, more specific points about where I see such humane study leading us.

The first concerns the study of the Qur'ān as a document of 7th century Arabia. The chief problem here is that already discussed of starting from an *a priori* definition of the Qur'ān as *either* divine or human, eternal or temporal. To limit the causal factors that

produced the Qur'ān to the purely transcendent or to the purely mundane is a metaphysical act that exceeds the proper reach of the historical scholar. Scholarly description and explanation must take cognizance of the possible involvement of transcendent as well as mundane factors in an historical reality such as that of Muhammad and the Qur'ān. The question of the actual process that issued in the recitations must remain in the end a mystery of faith, one not to be adjudicated in courts of human reason. A challenge here to the historian, whatever his or her faith—be it Marxist or Buddhist or Muslim—is to analyze the Qur'ānic event in a way that is cogent both to Muslim and non-Muslim colleagues, and perhaps even in a way that deals with it as both a numinous and a natural phenomenon—something by the way that some older Muslim intellectuals seem to have understood better than many more recent Muslim or non-Muslim scholars: witness the following two articles from an *'aqida* of al-Qushayrī (soon to be published by Richard Frank, whose translation I quote<sup>3</sup>):

The written copy [of the Qur'ān] is created in all its parts and it is not necessary that it be eternal because the speech of God is written in it, just as a mosque is created and it is not necessary that the mosque be eternal because God is worshipped in it. (art. xlii)

The recitation of the Koran by one of us, his utterance and his sounds, are all created, but what is recited is uncreated.... (art. xlv)

These are words of a man who has no difficulty with the human Qur'ān that is also the divine Qur'ān!

The second, and final, point is to remark that the kind of humane Qur'ān study that I see now emerging is that which is clearly signaled in the convening of this conference to treat “the Qur'ān through fourteen centuries.” I am convinced that it is the Qur'ān as scripture—that is, in its observable role in the lives of Muslims from the generation of Muhammad down to our own—that will continue increasingly to receive our attention. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out in a 1978 address to the North American Middle East Studies Association annual meeting, this *scriptural* history of the Qur'ān has been until recently a relatively neglected area of scholarship. Study of “Qur'ānic scripture” has generally meant study of the written text, whereas it should mean study of the Qur'ān precisely as “living [scriptural] word” among Muslims. I am sure that many of the papers before us in the next few days will show us that the pressing task at hand is to study not so much the antecedents and origins of what is in the Qur'ān but rather the historical and historic impact of Qur'ānic ideas (and the idea of the Qur'ān itself) in each of the past fourteen centuries, all around the globe. It is significant to recognize that millions of human beings have lived as they have because they held the Qur'ān to be God's Word to them and that millions of others no more or less pious or sincere have not heard God's Word in it. For such recognition and the scholarly elaboration of it,

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<sup>3</sup> Published subsequent to the writing of this piece as: “Two Short Dogmatic Works of Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī; Part 1: edition and translation of *Luma' fī l-i'tiqād*”, *MIDEO* 15 (1982), and “Two Short Dogmatic Works of Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī; Part 2: edition and translation of *al-Fusūl fī l-usūl*”, *MIDEO* 16 (1983); both are reprinted in Richard M. Frank, *Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism in Medieval Islam*, ed. Dimitri Gutas (Aldersgate, UK, etc.: Ashgate Variorum, 2005), 53-94.

normative judgments about who was right and who was wrong, if anyone was, are irrelevant. Such scholarship is a challenge, for it requires all of the openness and humility that I hope all of us here see as requisite in these first decades of the 15th Islamic century and final decades of the 20th century of the Common Era. In the next few days, we shall share in what should be an enterprise that will sound a clear note about the future of Qur’ānic scholarship. If we do our work well here and hereafter, we may have considerable say in what our generation and certainly that of our students understand to be the study of the Qur’ān. Our ambition should be to do our work in such a way that when a conference on “the Qur’ān through fifteen centuries” is convened, our labors will figure prominently and positively in the particular section of that conference that meets to consider the intervening hundred years of the Qur’ān’s role in human (that is, Muslim and non-Muslim) history.

Meanwhile, as we look ahead to our coming sessions here, and to work hereafter in our respective seminars and classes—in all of which we can be certain the sound of the Qur’ānic Word and talk of its history will constantly be in the air—let us take heart for the difficulties that we all shall surely encounter by recalling again an adage of the Prophet: *lā yadhhabu l’ilm mā qurī’a l-qur’ān*, “knowledge shall not perish so long as the Qur’ān is recited.”<sup>4</sup> How many other scholars devoted to one particular book can find the kind of comfort in their labors that this offers to all of “those who study and teach the Qur’ān”?

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Abd Allāh al-Dārimī, *Sunan* (2 vols. in 1, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Yamanī al-Madanī, Cairo 1386/1966), *Muqaddima* 18.8.